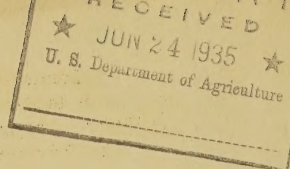


1.99
al 472R

THE PROBLEM OF WITHDRAWING POOR FARM
LANDS FROM CULTIVATION IN THE COTTON
BELT



A radio talk by Dr. W. A. Hartman, Director, Region 5, Division Program Planning, AAA, broadcast Friday, May 31, 1935, in the Department period of the National Farm and Home Hour over NBC and a network of 50 associate radio stations.

--ooOoo--

A bare subsistence living with none of the satisfactions of life and culture, is all that one hundred eleven thousand farm families - more than a half million persons - can look forward to in the Cotton Belt regions of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Florida.

Most of these farm operators are landless tenant and share-cropper farmers. They are stranded on lands so seriously eroded and depleted of soil fertility that even under normal economic conditions they have little more than mere existence to hope for.

The one hundred eleven thousand farms on which these families live only to work include ten million acres. Excepting the poor farm lands in the Coastal Plain and Flatwoods, the topography is generally steeply rolling, rough, and broken. Low farm incomes, low living standards, and meager community facilities exist in these poor farm areas.

Only the more definitely submarginal farms are included in these 111,000. Farms having soils of moderate fertility, and with less than half the acreage non-tillable because of erosion or other factors, are not included. For example: In Georgia almost three tenths of all lands in farms is seriously eroded, yet the 37,000 Georgia farms classed as definitely submarginal represent only slightly more than half the acreage of seriously eroded farm land.

A dense rural population in the Cotton Belt, with little or no alternative employment opportunities, dictates that land only moderately poor or marginal for farming must be continued in farming use to provide employment.

Withdrawal of poor farm land from cultivation is not new in the Cotton Belt. For generations it has been one step in a vicious land use cycle. Practically all the land was at some time used for cultivated crops. Recent investigations revealed that more than three-fourths of the total area of the 35 Old Plantation Piedmont Cotton Belt Counties in Georgia were used for cultivated crops, yet today less than one-fourth of the total area is so used. The boll weevil invasion and economic maladjustments since 1920 have merely accelerated the decrease in agricultural land. Thirty of these 35 counties had decreases in agricultural land prior to 1920. In 1880, 15 had 34 percent more agricultural acreage than they have today. Much of the land was cleared a second and even a third time. But the system of farming was not changed.

(over)

Lands were and still are cultivated to row crops (cotton and corn predominating), with little attention to terracing and soil-building crops. When virgin lands were still available, the outworn fields were permitted to revert to vegetation cover and new fields were cleared. Today, however, "new" fields are largely the outworn fields of the past. Consequently, the incentive to clear "new" lands is not great, and much land that would not support an adequate standard of living even under normal economic conditions is still in cultivation throughout the Belt. The 111,000 families stranded on those lands can hope for no more than a bare subsistence as payment for their efforts to earn a living from the soil.

Withdrawal of the definitely submarginal farm lands from cultivation, their development as forests, commercial game projects, recreation centers, and for livestock purposes, or combinations of purposes other than farming, is essential to effect the permanent improvement of the communities in which the lands are located.

Many public officials, business men, farmers, land owners, and other public spirited citizens are interested in curtailing or in preventing continued loss of land and human resources in these poor farm areas. They know that millions of acres have been almost permanently ruined for cultivated cropping and that other millions will be ruined unless a constructive program to check evils is adopted. They also know that the stranded families have little or no opportunity to improve their distressingly low social and economic standards. That is why the Cotton Belt almost unanimously approves the Rural Land Planning and Development Program of the Federal Resettlement Administration. It offers opportunity to establish repeatable demonstrations of what can and should be done in all of these areas which in reality are rural slum districts. It offers families stranded in rural slum areas opportunity to own homes, and small acreages of land suitable for growing subsistence crops. By developing the poor farm lands for the uses to which they are best suited, it also offers opportunity for the profitable employment - at least on a part-time basis - of one member of each stranded family.

Fourteen of these projects involving acquisition and development for various purposes of about two million acres and the permanent rehabilitation of nearly ten thousand families already have been initiated in these four States. State and county officials, organized groups of business men, and other well-informed citizens with no registered exceptions, hail these projects as the solution to their economic and social problems.

We who have had the privilege of locating, planning, and executing development of these projects are uniformly convinced that the results of efforts on these and additional projects that we hope to establish in the Southeastern States, will be landmarks of successful endeavor by the Administration to improve the economic and social life of the rural population.